



To: George Nagel  
From: Barry Mehler  
Date: 12/12/15

## FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Re: Distinguished Teacher, consent to nominate

**Consent by the nominee:** I am eligible for nomination based on the criteria stated in this Nomination Form. Attached are both my **Curriculum Vitae** and my three page essay.

**1. What teaching techniques do you use that you believe are helpful in bringing about effective student learning?**

***Thinking vs. Learning***

Thinking and learning are very different things. Thinking only takes place in the present moment and it only takes place in the presence of a question without an answer. If I ask you how much is  $2 + 2$ , you don't think the answer, you simply know the answer. When students enter my class, they think they know what is coming. They think they are going to be learning history. Instead, they discover they are going to be "thinking history."

*Thinking the Twentieth Century* (NY 2012) is an attempt by the renowned historian and public intellectual, Tony Judt (1948-2010), to "think" history. ... following an Eastern European intellectual tradition of presenting history in the form of extended conversations, which are personal encounters with history. *Thinking history* is an individual encounter with the past. Thinking is something that is done at a particular moment in time by a particular individual.

My teaching techniques are totally original. Two days before the new semester started this Fall, I sent all my students an email welcoming them to the new season of my show, "Sympathy for the Devil." The attachment was headed: "**WARNING**," in inch high bold red print. Below the student reads:

Dr. Mehler's show, "Sympathy for the Devil," is rated NC-17 - NOT FOR CHILDREN, CHILDREN NOT ADMITTED. The show contains gratuitous violence, lots of profanity and all kinds of perversions. The show is about American history and therefore contains insulting depictions of virtually every racial, ethnic and religious group. If profanity offends you or you do not want to have your values challenged, please do not take this class. This is Satan's show and no respect is shown to prophets or saints of any description.

My courses are all designed as a TV variety show entitled, "Sympathy for the Devil." The idea is to present the course material in an unusual way which takes the students out of the normal classroom environment and transports them onto the set of a TV show, where the rules of the game are all new and strange. None of this is explained. The medium is the message. Many students have reported in their initial journals, a collective experience of bewilderment, often expressed as, "Am I in the right room? This can't be a history class?"

Department of Humanities  
1009 Campus Drive, Big Rapids, MI 49307-2280  
Phone 231 591-3675

With the shades down and the lights all out, the show begins with the Rolling Stones singing the show's theme song, "Sympathy for the Devil." After the theme song, I introduce our sponsor, Camels cigarettes. Holding a pack of Camels, I launch into a long soliloquy urging my students to "take the Camels challenge, smoke Camels for thirty days and see for yourself what a difference this fine American product can do for you." And then I explain my grading system, which is based on the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. I tell them that just as Calvin believed salvation was entirely the result of God's grace, grades in this class have already been assigned and have nothing to do with your effort. There is no need to return ever again. The brightest students quickly realize that something is wrong, there must be some other meaning to all the nonsense. That is when they start thinking.

My classes are basically composed of puzzle pieces, some of which are repeated throughout the semester. It is quite common for a student to write after six or eight weeks, that they now understand one of the puzzle pieces. For example, many students report in their journal, sometimes in the tenth or eleventh week of the semester, that they finally realized, I'm not actually trying to get them to smoke. Each student comes to a confrontation with the past individually and repeating messages allows them to process the message at their own speed. History is an individual confrontation with the past and has no meaning outside the individual who encounters it.

**2. What procedures do you use to monitor your effectiveness as a teacher?  
What assessment practices are embedded in your classes?**

The primary procedure I use to monitor my students responses to the show is the journal assignments. Participants in the show are asked to turn in journals once a week. The journals are not graded and they can be in any format the student likes. One student kept an online journal, another uploaded YouTube videos and this semester one student did her journals entirely in graphic art form. The journal can be a criticism of any aspect of the show but it can also be a question or comment. I get more than a hundred of these journals every week. I run them all through a pdf reader. I have thousands of journals from the past few years. I post a few journals or clips from journals every week and I regularly email students in response to their journals. For example, I get a number of students who write, "I bet you don't read these..." I always send them a note, "yes, of course, I read them. I want to know what you have to say." I monitor these journals very closely. I love reading them. As one student noted in a recent journal, "there is never a dual moment!" I encourage the students to write whatever they like, by repeating, almost mantra-like, "I count the journals, I don't grade them."

Naturally, I use the normal array of exams and essays to monitor student progress, but the journals are my way of taking the pulse of the class.

**3. What professional development activities have you done in the past five years that have helped in becoming a more effective teacher?**

In January 2014, I published a short encyclopedia piece on Hereditarianism and later that year a short review on a new study of sterilization in North America and Germany in the twentieth century. I realized, as I was formatting each of these short publication, that they

would make excellent writing assignments for my two and three hundred level classes. Instead of writing one standard academic research paper, I decided to have them, do what had just done, write one short book review for the midterm and one short encyclopedia essay for the final. I gave my students the same instructions and samples that I was given along with my manuscript, which had been accepted for publication. It has proven a great exercise. It gives the students two different writing assignments and it challenges them to read the instructions carefully. In the class exercise, I am the editor of the journal or encyclopedia. The student has been invited to submit an entry for publication. If the work is published, they will be on their way to fame and fortune, if it is rejected, they will be headed for poverty and obscurity.

I'm not sure what else to say about this. I am currently involved in several long term projects, all of which are integral parts of my teaching. There is no wall separating my work or life outside the classroom with my pedagogy. For example, my Institute has been collecting an online archive on the John Tanton, the father of the modern anti-immigration movement. It is striking to realize that the center of the anti-immigration movement is not located in Arizona, but Petoskey. Naturally, I use that material in my Michigan History class.

I, also think watching Deadwood really helped me improve my use of profanity and my understanding of its importance in American history. Americans were generally more profane than Europeans, Westerners than Easterners; but no group were more profane than miners and mining camps. As David Milch, the brilliant creator of Deadwood commented, "these people came to rape the land and their language was their way of declaring themselves up to the task." I don't explain that there was a lot of profanity in the American experience, I include a lot of it in my presentations.

**4. How have you demonstrated an interest in students outside of the customary learning situations, such as student organizations, advising, etc.?**

I would like to let one example suffice. In the fall of 2012, Brenda Walton sent me a note saying that she needed to consult with me regarding a student who needed kosher food. Brenda is the Director of Dietary Food Needs for our Dining service, so the request was not unusual. However, if a student requests kosher food, they need much more than kosher food. It means the student is Jewish and traditional and there are no services for Jewish students on this campus. We have no Hillel, no Jewish student groups of any kind. Jews, on this campus, are entirely invisible.

I contacted the student, an Iranian Jew, campus housing thought it would be a good idea to put him into a suite with a Saudi student. The two students had one brief exchange in which the Iranian student, in answer to a direct question, replied, "I'm Jewish" and those were the last words that passed between them. Caryn and I adopted him. He was with us for Passover, Hanukkah, Friday evening Sabbath meals. I have done this for Jewish students for the entire 25 years I have been a faculty member here. But for me, those students would have been completely isolated, alienated and ignored.

Signature: Bam Mehl

Your nominee could be the

# ***Ferris State University Distinguished Teacher***

For 2015-2016

The Distinguished Teacher Award is symbolic of the appreciation of the Ferris State University faculty for their dedication to and excellence in teaching and carries with it an award of \$2500. The Distinguished Teacher Award Committee requests your help to identify a faculty member to be considered for this honor. Nominations must be made by tenured or tenure-track faculty. **The nominee must be a tenured faculty member teaching at least 75% of a full-time load. Past recipients of the Distinguished Teacher Award are not eligible.** The candidate should excel in the following areas:

- (A) Teaching excellence.
- (B) Interest in students outside the classroom/laboratory.
- (C) Participation in professional development activities.
- (D) Exhibit distinction as a member of the university community as it impacts teaching.

## **Past Recipients of the Distinguished Teacher Award**

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Pasquale Di Raddo  
Abdollah Ferdowsi  
Clifton Franklund  
Richard Goosen  
J. Randall Groves  
Jennifer Johnson

David Hanna  
Fred Heck  
Daniel Adsmond  
Gary Huey  
Marilyn Keigley  
Robert McCullough  
Phillip Middleton  
Roxanne Cullen  
Avesh Raghunandan

Terry Nerbonne  
Daniel Noren  
David Pilgrim  
Sheila MacEachron  
Caroline Stern  
Khagendra Thapa  
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